

Stranger Still by rideswraptors

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Summary:

El and Will are getting sick and tired. Sick and tired, do you understand? So Papa Hop better have some answers.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

Set just before Stranger Times.

“Will!” Dustin whined, “Your sister’s being crazy again!”

“Am not!”

“Are too!”

“For fuck’s sake, you two are worse than Dustin and Lucas.”

“Hey!” the two boys protested simultaneously.

Max and El were bent over one of Max’s school projects, nearest to Dustin, while the boys planned out their spring break. Dustin kept critiquing their work, spouting off little known history facts, even though they *weren’t wanted* . El finally threatened to sabotage his bike if he didn’t leave them alone, which had him complaining to Will. Yes, El and Mike were glued at the hip and El would do anything Mike asked. But! Mike was a pushover when it came to El getting her way, so he was no good to any of them against her. Will, however, seemed to manage her in a way that the others couldn’t. They had their “creepy” bond, as Lucas called it. For the first few months after her return, Mike had been wildly jealous of how close they were. But it was very obvious to everyone else that El was stupidly in love with the nerdy Wheeler kid.

“El, be nice.”

“I *am* being nice,” El argued back reasonably. But then she turned to whisper to Max, “I told him *before* I messed up his bike...”

“ *Will!* Seriously!”

“El?” he prompted without looking up at her.

With a sigh and a scowl, she repeated one of the few rules the party had for her, “I will not perform devious acts of vengeance on the personal property of any given party member without the party’s consent.”

“Please and thank you,” Will said dismissively, continuing his sketching.

“I wish my sister was that reasonable,” Mike grumbled as he flipped through the D&D handbook. El used her mind to nudge at his foot, meeting his gaze when he scowled at her. It wasn’t a real scowl though because it evaporated into the fond smile she liked so much.

El wasn’t technically Will’s sister. It was wishful thinking on the party’s part, and the boys had quickly decided to always refer to her that way. Hopper and Mrs. Byers weren’t together. Will and El knew for certain that they slept in the same bed every Wednesday, and that Hopper looked at Mrs. Byers like Jonathan looked at Nancy. Like Mike looked at El. Only sadder. Because Nancy kissed Jonathan and

El kissed Mike, and Mrs. Byers never kissed Hopper. For El, it was that simple. Will wasn't El's brother until Mrs. Byers kissed Hopper, but she could accept that she was Will's sister. It was a strange balance, but it fit them well. Once Mike went back to his campaign planning, El caught Will's gaze.

He looked as sad as El felt. They were both stuck watching their respective parent be miserable without the other. Watching them pine was almost worse than how El felt during her year in hiding. Almost worse than Will felt when he got lost in the Upside Down and couldn't talk to anyone. There were only so many people who could talk about what happened back in November, who could talk about what really happened to Bob and Will. Steve, Nancy, and Jonathan had each other. The party had every party member. Hopper and Mrs. Byers only had each other, and they wouldn't *do* anything about it. They just...slept in the same bed one night a week and went about their lives like nothing had ever happened. Will knew that nothing ever "happened" between them because Jonathan said so, and Will trusted his brother on that.

El knew because Hopper was always sadder on Thursday nights. He got grumpy and moody and didn't feel like talking. He didn't drink anymore because El had asked him to stop. He was cutting back on smoking too, but he did all of his smoking on Thursday nights. He would sit out on the porch, no matter how cold it was and chain smoke until El threatened to drag him in with her powers. She'd done it once too, when the snow was falling fast and thick, and he'd been stubborn about it.

El knew because Hopper always got really happy on Wednesday mornings. Not even pranks with garden gnomes or bashed in mailboxes or rowdy drunkards could dim his mood. El had learned to ask for things on Wednesday mornings; books, clothes, a movie night with the party two towns over. Hopper was always in such a good mood that he would say yes. Usually it was with stipulations like

chores, but she could handle that. But it was a pattern, and El noticed patterns.

Will knew because his mother didn't wake up screaming or crying on Wednesday nights. Because she always seemed a little brighter on Thursday mornings. She would wake up earlier than usual, put on music in the kitchen as she cooked up pancakes for everyone. Jonathan got an extra hour of sleep on Thursday mornings, but Will and El would wake up and huddle next to each other, listening to their respective parents sing (very badly) some of their favorite songs from their formative years. They would lay there until Mrs. Byers called for them to get up. Will had school and Hopper had to get El back to the cabin before work. El was the first one to voice the question.

"Do you think they'll ever tell each other?" she'd whispered as the sun came up. Will had only shaken his head and shrugged. Will didn't like to talk on those mornings. He later told El it was because he was so used to hearing his mom yell and fight with his father. It was nice to hear his mom laugh and sing. El thought it was pretty nice too, so she didn't try to talk either.

But that had been *months* ago. It was almost April now. A few days to break. And El was *sick* of waiting. It didn't help that she was constantly running out of books and movies and TV was boring now that she had schoolwork from Nancy. But even the schoolwork was running dry because Nancy was busy and El was getting close to being caught up with everyone else. So there really wasn't much to do but sit around and read and think. All the books she read had families in them. Some were happy, some were broken, some never got fixed, but at least they had a family. El would have been more than content with Hopper and her party and the Byers and Wheelers if her father wasn't so obviously miserable over Mrs. Byers.

So she'd confided in Will and Will confided in Jonathan. El wanted to know what they thought about it, and then she was going to ask her father. She was going to ask him why he was unhappy and what he planned to do about it. But not unless Will said it was okay. Because Will was her friend and you didn't keep secrets or lie to your friends.

El wanted to be Will's sister for real.

El was only allowed over to the Wheeler's house every once in awhile. Otherwise, Max and the boys had to go to her in the cabin. It wasn't "technically" safe, but Hopper had quickly realized that if she wasn't allowed to see her friends, she'd go out on her own. At least this way he knew where she was, and had some control over the situation. El didn't care either way as long as she got to see her friends.

There was a specific protocol for leaving the Wheeler's house, which involved Steve Harrington picking up El, Will, and Dustin. He wasn't quite on the radar as the Byers were, and since he was as much a part of El's life as the others were, it was a natural solution. Besides, Steve and Dustin had gotten pretty close, and Mrs. Henderson was always looking for extra help keeping track of him. So Steve would go into the Wheeler's house on the pretense of seeing Nancy and picking up Dustin while Will and El snuck out to the car. Steve would emerge from the front of the house with Dustin, making a show of it, and drive Dustin home. Jonathan would pick up Will and El behind Dustin's house, and drop El off at the cabin before going home. It was a convoluted plan, for sure, but it made Hopper feel better.

So El and Will were waiting in the car when Will gave her the okay.

"You should talk to him. The chief, I mean," he said slowly. "I don't

think I can deal with Mom this summer if..." El nodded eagerly. She was more than ready to have it out with her adoptive father. Chomping at the bit, as Max liked to say. El was getting sick of Hopper's moodiness and the way he got sad all the time when he thought she wasn't looking. It was stupid. And Hopper had promised her that he wouldn't be stupid anymore.

They didn't have much of a chance to keep talking about it because Steve and Dustin got into the car, bickering as usual.

"...what is there to not understand? It is basic biology!" Dustin insisted.

"Dust...jesus fucking christ...you cannot, I repeat, *cannot*, walk around saying shit like that to girls! Have I taught you nothing?"

"It is a relevant *fact*, Harrington!"

"Relevant to people who die alone, yes!"

They went on like this for some time. Will and El exchanged an exasperated look before trying to get them to change the subject. It took some doing. Dustin did like to rant. At one point, Steve threatened to kick him out of the car and make him walk home. Dusting snottily reminded him that Jonathan had kicked his ass once and could kick it again. Which led to more bickering and complaining.

“How do I always end up with you dipshits? I mean seriously, I would like an answer. How come Jonathan and Nancy are laughing it up at some stupid movie and I’m driving a bunch of assholes around because *you* ,” he pointed an accusatory finger at the rear view mirror, meaning El, “can’t stay away from your boyfriend for more than a few days at a time? Huh? Tell me that!” El spat her tongue out at him, making Will and Dustin laugh.

“It’s cause--” Dustin snorted, “You’re such a good babysitter.”

“Yeah Steve,” Will kicked the back of his seat, “It’s all those paternal instincts.”

“Shut up, dillweed!” He shoved a hand out at Dustin’s face, knocking him back a little, “And *you* be quiet or I’ll tell your mother about that *project* out in the cellar.”

“You son of a bitch, you wouldn’t fucking dare!”

“Watch your mouth and yes I would!” He shoved playfully at Dustin again, “And I need you on Saturday afternoon. You’re coming with me on my date with Cindy to play with her little sister.”

“Cindy’s sister is like...8?” Dustin shrieked incredulously. “What am I supposed to do with an 8 year old?”

“How the fuck should I know? Cindy thinks it’s cute that I treat you like a little brother, so you’re gonna start earning your keep and

acting like one.” By this point, El and Will were collapsed in giggles, thinking about Dustin trying to keep an eight year old entertained while Steve made out with her sister.

“You are shitting me!”

“I am not fucking shitting you and watch your fucking mouth! El is too fucking impressionable!”

“Fuck you!”

“And you!” he twisted the mirror to glare at Will. “Have you been sleeping?”

“Yes.”

“El?”

“Sometimes.”

“Hey!”

“Sometimes you make sounds when you sleep. Like...like a hurt dog.”

“Byers?”

“Nightmares,” he groused. “ *Dreams*, Steve. I’m not seeing stuff.”

“Good. So where are we on Operation Parent Trap?”

The three of them told Steve Harrington *everything* . Well, Dustin had talked them into doing it. Sometimes his advice was helpful, sometimes it was just stupid. But El liked him, liked how he treated Dustin like a little brother, liked that he was protective of Will even though he wasn’t dating Nancy anymore. So they’d talked about their parents and how annoying they were being.

“I’m going to talk to him tonight.”

“Think it’ll work?”

“No,” she grumbled, folding her arms. Hopper was too stubborn. He wasn’t going to admit or say or do *anything* to upset the calm status quo they had going right now. El understood that sentiment all too well. And if she’d let that fear rule her, she never would have gotten away from Papa or found Mike or found the party or Kali or a family. She would have been a monster hooked up to machines for the rest of her life.

“Buck up kid, that punk look doesn’t suit you.”

"That jacket was badass though," Dustin mumbled quietly, mostly to himself.

"Kid?" Steve tried again.

El shrugged, "We'll fight. I yell. He yells. I break things. He yells more. TV gone. Eggos gone."

"Are you really still eating that shit?" El rolled her eyes. "Hey! What did I just say about being a punk?"

"It doesn't suit me?"

"Damn right it doesn't. Look, Chief Hop's a good dude, right? Just be direct with him. Tell him what you're thinking."

"What if he doesn't like it?"

Dustin turned around in his seat. "It's about planting the seed. Kind of like mold. Doesn't matter what the conditions are, once the spores set in, they spread and grow, right?" El nodded. "Right. So all you gotta do is toss that spore in his direction. Then it's stuck."

"He might be right," Will chimed in quietly, "Maybe they just don't realize..."

El arched a prim eyebrow at that, not at all convinced. If they didn't know how they felt about each other, then they were mouth breathers. Absolutely dummies. And Hopper had promised to stop being stupid.

"What does Jonathan say?"

Will snorted, "What he always says--"

"*Mind your own business*," the three kids intoned mockingly, making Steve laugh outright.

"Sounds like Byers. Well maybe he's right too. Never can tell what old people are thinking."

"*Oh my god!*" Dustin groaned, "Are you shitting me? Those two stare at each other more than Mike and El! They're like obsessed with each other! What are you even saying? Are you blind? Have your Cindy-obsessed eyes fallen out of your skull? Have you lost your goddamn mind?"

"Jesus christ! Okay! I get it, damn!" Steve slapped out at him again. "Dude, yes, obviously they want to bone each other. But I wasn't gonna say that in front of her *kid*. Damn Henderson."

"Bone?" El asked, scrunching up her nose. Will shrugged just as Steve threw the car into park and dropped his head to the steering wheel.

“Chief Hop is gonna kill me. I’m gonna die. I’ll never get to graduation.”

“You are so damn dramatic,” Dustin scowled. He turned in his seat again. “It means they want to have sex with each other.” He flapped his hands together in an odd wave-like pattern that made no sense. El understood anyway.

“Oh. Yes. They want to bone,” she agreed.

Steve sat up and shrugged in defeat, “What’s one more tally on the death count in this town, right?”

“Dude. Take a pill,” Dustin snapped, shoving at Steve’s shoulder. “See you tomorrow Will. El.” They bumped fists and Dustin left. Steve pulled the car around back where Jonathan was waiting for them. Steve passed the kids off eagerly and rolled down his window to talk to Jonathan.

“If I’m not at school tomorrow, it was Hopper.”

“What?”

“Trust me.”

Jonathan twisted in his seat, curious, but the two kids only shrugged, feigning confusion. On the way to the cabin, Jonathan interrogated them both about their day. He still hovered over Will a bit. El knew Will didn't mind it so much, but everyone else did. And it's not like he was the only one doing it either. Steve and Nancy were just as bad. Mrs. Byers and Hopper were worse. El was used to people watching her all of the time, but the boys weren't. Dustin claimed it was "cramping his style." And Mike just wanted everyone to stop telling his parents what he was up to.

Jonathan dropped her at the front of the path back to the cabin. There wasn't really much that could get to El, anyway. She trudged back through the muddy woods, using her powers to deflect the rain away. Hopper didn't like it when she did that, claimed that it wasted too much of her energy. El thought he was ridiculous.

She maneuvered the trip wire and went inside without knocking. Which also annoyed Hopper. He groused at her from the kitchen as she went back to her bedroom, seemingly ignoring him. She was ignoring him, but she wanted it to *look* like she was ignoring him too. Sometimes people couldn't tell. She tossed her backpack and her jacket into a corner and sat huffily down on her bed. She crossed her arms and stared at the door opening. Waiting.

This was how they fought. El would stomp off to her room and sit and stare at the door until she was calm and ready to talk. Then she would open the door and wait until Hopper was calm and ready to talk. They would talk through the door. It was really the only way to keep El from blowing out the windows every time Hopper got upset. They were getting pretty good at it.

Hopper stared across the kitchen at that open door for a long moment. Usually, she slammed it pretty hard before she opened it

again. So...not having a hissy fit. That was good. But this whole leaving the door open thing was new. Maybe...she just wanted to talk? But she really didn't have a problem coming to him when she needed questions answered or to work up a good cry. He tapped his thigh rapidly, hesitating even though this was an obvious invitation.

"El?" he called out tentatively, not really sure what was going on. Radio silence. He dropped his head in defeat. Once more unto the breach, then. He went to stand in the doorway, using his hands to brace himself on either side. It took him a long moment to lift his head to look at her.

"All right, kid, let's hear it."

"You love me."

Hopper shook his head in surprise, trying to break through the strangeness, "Yes."

"I love you." He nodded slowly, wanting to follow her logic here. "And I love Mike." His eyebrows shot straight up at that. "Same or different?"

"Different," he affirmed quickly, not really willing to bicker over the whole preteens in love nonsense. That was a long held dispute with no goddamn resolution in sight.

"You love me," she repeated gravely, "And you love Joyce." Even he

could feel himself rear back at that accusation. He felt his gut clench because he knew what the next words out of her mouth would be. He brought a hand over his mouth, dragged it through his beard, not responding immediately when she asked the same question. She slapped the bed.

“Same or different?” she snapped again. Hopper scowled and jabbed a finger at her.

“It’s not that simple!” he shot back. “Yes, I care about Joyce and the boys, but it’s not as simple as you and Mike.” Her nostrils flared in her annoyance, only making him more irritated.

“Yes it is!”

“No. El. It is *not* ! You and Mike are dumb kids. You’re not grown ups with responsibilities and...history...and--.”

“History?”

“What?” he snapped irritably. He winced when she flinched. He forgot sometimes that the black hole in him tended to lash out. El was still just a little girl and fragile, and he forgot that sometimes. He didn’t forget it now. Fuck it, he grumbled to himself. Then he went in and sat down on the bed beside her, destroying their usual protocol. This wasn’t their usual protocol anyway.

“Look...” he held out his hands in front of him, trying to explain,

"Before Joyce married Will and Jon's dad...when we were in high school we..."

"Loved each other," El filled in. He held up a finger.

"No," he argued, "No I didn't say that. Don't go putting words in my mouth, kid, you know I don't like it."

"Sorry."

"Right. Anyway. We...dated. Sort of...like...Like Wheeler's sister and Steve, right? Just for a little while...and then she decided she liked Lonnie instead."

"Lonnie?"

"Byers. Will and Jonathan's dad."

"Oh."

He scowled at the pity in her voice, "Don't go gettin' ideas, kid, okay? It wasn't that big of a deal. Just like it isn't now."

El sniffed, looking up at him with those big brown eyes of hers, "Friends don't lie."

“I’m not lying.”

“Uh huh,” she argued, nodding her head vigorously. “Your eyes are lying. Because I see how you look at her.”

“Uh hmm, and how is that?” he asked with thinly veiled sarcasm. Not that El understood most of his sarcasm.

“Like she’s home at the end of a dark road.”

“Kid...” He felt his chest cave in a little at her soft words. How in the hell..? Part of him knew exactly what she was talking about because she was right. Joyce had always been this bright spot in his life, this stalwart pillar of happier times. Times before. But now there were times *after* . After Sarah. After Lonnie. After the Upside Down. After the...Mind Flayer or whatever the kids called it. Their history was becoming more present than past. And now they were...Well fuck, he slept in her bed every Wednesday night and every Thursday morning it got harder and harder to leave. He was finding it harder and harder to make up excuses to stay away. It was like...what the fuck did that Henderson kid call it? Entro--Entorop? Entropy. No matter how carefully he behaved, no matter how hard he tried, things returned to chaos. Jim Hopper returned to Joyce Byers. Like those fucking magnets the Sinclair kid was obsessed with. Moth to a goddamn flame.

“No more lying.”

"I'm not lying, El," he told her seriously. "There's a lot more to it than just...how I feel. Okay? Do you get that? Do you understand what I'm telling you? Joyce loved Bob. He died. She needs to grieve. And I..."

"*Don't lie !*" she snapped angrily.

"I'm not!" he bellowed back at her, getting to his feet. "We've talked about this."

The little girl's face darkened, and despite himself, he felt the fear shoot down his spine.

"Jim Hopper is *not* a black hole," she growled out dangerously. The lamp behind her flickered, the threat implied.

"Give it a rest, El."

"No! Say it!"

"El, I'm serious--!"

"So am I!" she bandied back. They glared at each other. A real Mexican standoff except that Hopper had nothing, no weapon, no defense. This kid had him by the balls. Or the heart. Or whatever you wanted to call it. Hopper had nothing on this kid, nothing to hold her back with. Not anymore, anyway. She crossed her arms, putting on

that really cute pout he was starting to hate *a lot* .

“I want a mama.”

“You got one. Not a whole one, but there you go.”

“I want *Joyce* to be my mama!”

“That is ridiculous, okay? Out of the question.”

“But you love her!”

Hopper lost it, “So *what* ?!” he raged at her, arms in the air. All he got from her was a small smirk, making him let out a long list of expletives she probably already got from Henderson. Needed to have a talk with that kid about his goddamn mouth. He dragged a hand through his hair and down his neck, letting the anger boil over and evaporate. Sometimes she made him so mad he couldn’t fucking see straight. He barrelled through.

“So what if I do?” he kept asking. “It doesn’t matter because that woman deserves a break. Someone to take good care of her and those boys--”

“You do that!”

“It’s not just about me, kid, okay? That’s not how it works.”

El went completely blank. Which he absolutely hated. Usually, what she felt was right on the surface. If he knew what she felt, he knew what she was thinking. This blank stare thing was some teenage bullshit she was picking up from those pain in the ass kids, he just fucking *knew it* . He waited. Because waiting out El was probably the only way to resolve any issue.

“So...you are saying that if Joyce says she loves you too, then you’ll stop being stupid and marry her?”

“What?” he followed up, flabbergasted. How had this gotten so out of control? No. Whatever. No. This was not happening. “Fine, fine, whatever. Yes okay? If Joyce Byers shouted from the damn rooftops that she was in love with me, then yes, I would drag her ass to the courthouse and marry her, all right?” Because the chances of that happening were *nil* at best.

“Fine,” El said, uncrossing her arms and smiling. Hopper reared back, the whole gambit of angry and confused feelings passing over him.

“Fine?” he sneered, disbelieving. “Okay. Fine. Whatever. Are you hungry?” he asked whirling around to exit her room. “Cause I’m hungry. And *tired* , El. I am so goddamn tired...”

El was compliant for the rest of the night. Did whatever Hopper asked, responded quickly and pleasantly. Didn’t cause any fuss. He watched her suspiciously, but she didn’t really care. It wasn’t until

she heard him snoring the next room over that she snuck out to the radio to send the message.

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Op PT is go.

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Bitchin'

2. Chapter 2

“Paper?”

“Check.”

“Pencils?”

“Check.”

“Flashflight?”

“Check.”

“Sustenance?”

El tossed a box of Eggos, Tastykakes, apples, and few bottles of water into the bag.

“Check.”

“El,” Will admonished with a shake of his head. She rolled her eyes

and pulled the Eggos back out. He was adamant that no one was lighting a fire anywhere near Castle Byers, and so the Eggos were out. Everyone insisted that she stop eating them cold because it was “disgusting.” Instead, she put in the deer jerky Hopper had given the Byers after his last hunting trip. El was kind of sick of the stuff, truth be told, but it was better than *spinach* .

“Are we set for adventuring?” he asked, putting down his checklist.

“Aye, aye captain!” she shot back cheekily. Max had taught her that one. Apparently it came from a video game at the arcade. The Wheelers were out of town for the weekend, visiting their grandmother, and Jonathan had gone with them. Max, Lucas, and Dustin were presumably with Steve because Will had been deemed “sick,” so El had offered to stay behind with him to keep him company. Hopper and Mrs. Byers were out doing some “grown up stuff” that Hopper wouldn’t elaborate on. All that meant was that Will and El were free to run about as they saw fit. El was wary of Will doing too much, he was resigned to do as he said. So, they were hiking out to Castle Byers to talk plans.

There was still a chill in the air, as winter had decided to linger much longer than usual. El revelled in jumping on the remaining leaves, liking how they crunched. But what she liked more was the smell of green things all around them and Will’s awful singing as they walked through the woods.

I've got the spirit, lose the feeling, let it out somehow.

El liked the music Will listened to, sometimes the stuff Jonathan listened to, but mostly Will’s. Some of it you could dance to, but most of the time the words just made sense. Wanting something better out

of life, wanting to feel something different. Feeling weird and strange and out of place. El liked spending time with Will because well...Jonathan called it "shared trauma." But...El really thought it was because they didn't have to ask each other questions. Will always explained things without being told, and El knew what he'd seen in the Upside Down. She knew what he'd felt and experienced. They just...didn't need to ask. Will was a lot stronger than the adults gave him credit for; El had seen the Upside Down rip grown men to shreds, tore them up inside. Will had basically swallowed the worst of it, and came out the other side. She'd decided, when everything had calmed down again, that it was her job to keep him safe from then on. All of them, but Will most especially. He was the key to destroying the Mind Flayer.

And he was her brother.

"So how are things going with Max?" he asked, voice chipper despite his congestion. He really was just happy to be out of the house. El smiled, thinking about the girl who was fast becoming one of her closest friends.

"Good. Billy finally left."

"Good," Will intoned. "That guy was such a creep."

"Hmmm, mouth breather," she agreed. El really did like Max. She was cool and funny and didn't take crap from anybody. Mike hadn't quite warmed up to her yet. He said that Max was going to get between Lucas and Dustin, and that it would ruin the party. El thought he was being stupid, but there wasn't much she could do about it. Once they got to Castle Byers, El tossed the backpack on the cot, and jumped onto the spot next to it.

“So where do we start?” she asked, watching him intently. Will hesitated, pulling out his sketchbook and pencils instead.

“Well...” he started slowly, “Whenever I eavesdropped on Mom and Bob, she was always saying that they needed to do things *alone* .”

El clapped her hands together, “They are alone right now.”

Will scowled, “Not like *that* . Not running errands and doing stupid adult stuff. Like...like a date!” She cocked her head, only having one context for that word. “No,” Will corrected immediately, “Not like a date to a dance. That’s kid stuff. A date like they do in the movies. A restaurant and fancy food and candles.”

“Okay?”

Will winced, “Right. Not much chance of us getting them there...”

El scrunched up her face while she tried to think. She’d watched *a lot* of TV while she was hiding out at the cabin. And most of the time, those people went on dates like Will said, to restaurants and stuff. But they did other stuff too. In their own houses.

“What about a...uh, home date?” she offered tentatively.

“What?” Will’s expression closed up as she explained what she had seen and what they could potentially do. But Will was shaking his head.

“Our house always has people in it. Steve and Nancy are over all the time, the party...sometimes my dad shows up....” He looked really sad about that, which weirdly made El more angry than sad. She had a feeling that if she ever met Will’s real dad, she would probably hurt him. Not...on purpose...but probably. She snapped her fingers.

“The cabin!” Will’s eyes lit up like the Christmas lights Mrs. Byers still kept in the living room. “We can make them dinner and bring candles.”

“I don’t know how to cook.”

“Jonathan does.”

“We could ask Nancy to make it pretty!”

“But how do we get them there?” El asked, bringing the conversation to a halt. Will slumped, lips scrunched up as he watched her, deep in thought. El bounced her fingers on her thigh, that’s what Hopper did when he was trying to think. Maybe it would help.

“We need sustenance,” Will decided. “And art.” El nodded gravely and tossed him the bag. They set out their snacks and Will began sketching out the next part of “Zombie Boy.” El was coming up with

the story while he drew it. In it, the zombie boy got lost in the world of the dead, and came back to find out that people had forgotten about him. So he leaves home and goes on adventures, saving people from stuff that escaped the world of the dead. In this part he finds out that he has a long lost sister with psychic abilities, and she tells him his family is in danger and he needs to come home. He ripped open a portal that she needs his help to close. Hopper called their project *cathartic* . El thought it was awesome that Will made them into superheroes.

They chatted as they worked, El wrote down bits of dialogue and the storyline just so they wouldn't forget it. He asked for her opinion on how he was drawing things. Sometimes she had good answers, sometimes she didn't. Will never seemed to care too much, but he really liked it when she had specific things to talk about. So she did her best, just to make them happy.

"We could trick them," Will muttered, coloring in a tree trunk.

"No."

She didn't really need to say more than that. Hopper and Mrs. Byers did *not* do well with surprises anymore. They got really, really mad when things didn't go like they were supposed to. That meant she and Hopper fought a lot, but Hopper always apologized to her after. Reminded her that she was his little girl, his kid, his responsibility, and they'd been through too much to lose each other for something stupid.

"We could...tell them it's a thank you dinner? One just for grown ups?"

El frowned, "What are we thanking them for?"

Will looked up at her, brow furrowed, but gave up and shrugged.

"Everything, I guess."

"Okay...a date dinner undercover as a thank you dinner?"

Will snapped his fingers and pointed at her, "Exactly!"

She slumped a little, "We're gonna need some help."

"We'll radio the party--"

What in hell do you two think you're doing?!

Will's comment was cut off by Hopper's bellow from down the woods. El crawled on her hands and knees to stick her head out the sheet, which served as their door, just enough to see Mrs. Byers and Hopper stalking down the path toward them. Mrs. Byers was smoking, and Hopper's face looked like it was about to explode.

"Code green," she muttered back to Will. In response, he dashed to

clean up their lists and supplies. She tossed him the spare blanket and water bottled and he huddled up in the corner of the cot, like he was resting. El grabbed the book she kept there, safe in a plastic bag, and opened it to the middle, making it look like she was just reading, and sat across from him.

Their respective parents were knocking on the top of Castle Byers not one second later.

There's a password, Hop .

Do you think I give a damn--

“Radaghast!” Mrs. Byers shouted out. El looked over at Will, rolling her eyes. If she wasn’t going to read the party’s newsletter...Will waved her off.

“Come in!”

They snatched back the sheet to reveal to the two innocent-looking pre-teens. Will was bundled up and staying hydrated, like he was supposed to, and El was staying out of trouble, like she was supposed to. Hopper looked peeved.

“What are you two doing out here?” he growled out. Mrs. Byers tried to calm him down by touching his forearm, but it didn’t work. El noticed. But she simply smiled and lifted her book.

“Reading.” It was called *The Color of Magic* and Mr. Clarke had recommended it to the party. The boys had all finished it, so it was El’s turn. She had Will’s copy, which she kept in Castle Byers, and Mike’s copy, which she kept at the cabin. She liked reading out loud much better, because then someone could explain funny words to her.

“Sorry, Chief,” Will said quickly, “I just wanted some fresh air and--and El forgot her book at home, so...” He trailed off, pulling that *cutesy* face that always had the grownups giving in. Or, that’s what Dustin said. The grownups were always so worried about him that whenever he “got cute,” they gave him whatever he wanted. Lucas called it a bunch of bullshit. El thought it was probably fair, seeing as he’d spent part of his time in the Upside Down and spent the other part having the Upside Down inside him. El scowled.

“We left a *note*,” she snipped at him. Max had informed her that this was the best way to inform adults that she didn’t care what they thought. *As long as you play by the rules*. It worked to some extent because Mrs. Byers had to turn her head and smother a laugh, but the vein in Hopper’s forehead pulsed in irritation.

“Which is the *only* reason--!”

“Hop!” Mrs. Byers interrupted, “Maybe we should do this back at the house?” Her voice got all of his attention in a second, and she smiled sweetly up at him, brows raised. “I gotta get dinner started anyway.”

El could see the moment Hopper caved. It was obvious on his face, visible. And this is what El had seen the whole time. The same thing

that Hopper still didn't see himself. El couldn't help it, she let out a soft snort. Hopper whipped his face back to hers, incredulous.

"We are gonna have a talk, little lady."

El shrugged, putting her book back in its bag, "I already told you--"

"Okay then, you two, let's get back to the house. Step to it!" Mrs. Byers interrupted. Will grabbed his things and shoved them at Hopper. Then he dragged him along the path, talking a mile a minute about something he'd read about the day before. Will was very good at distracting grownups. Mrs. Byers didn't fall for it though, she put a hand to El's elbow, slowing her for a moment so that they were a few paces behind.

"What has gotten into you lately, huh?" she asked gently, and not a little concerned. El just shrugged, feigning indifference. "I don't know, honey. Obviously, you're up to something. I know when those boys are coming up with those crazy plans of theirs, but..." She stopped her, brushing a lock of her hair behind her ear and patting her cheek, "Don't drive your dad *too* crazy, okay? Cause the rest of us have to deal with him too."

El smiled up at Mrs. Byers. She was so pretty and nice, and she always wanted what was best for everybody. That's why El had picked her out as a mama. Because of Hopper too, of course. She made her dad really, really happy, even if they were too stupid to admit it. So El pulled back on the smile and tried to seem apologetic.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Byers. I didn't mean to." She twisted her lip as they

kept walking. "But having you around always makes him feel better," she tried. "Could we stay for dinner? Just until he calms down?"

Mrs. Byers looked at her like she'd grown a second head. Like she'd said something completely baffling.

"I do?"

And totally missed the dinner request.

Seed. Planted.

"Yeah," El confirmed, as if it were completely obvious (because it *was*). "He gets...stressed...and he used to drink beer, but now we just come to see you."

"Really?" Mrs. Byers asked, as if running through every visit in her mind. "I didn't know that."

"Mhmm," El nodded, kicking out at a nearby branch, "He says that Will and Jonathan's dad drinks all the time and he doesn't want to be that kind of dad to me, so he doesn't drink or go see women anymore."

"He *told* you that?" she asked in a shrill whisper.

She nodded again, “Mhmm, he said the next woman he went out with would end up being my mama.”

“You’re kidding me,” she said, almost breathlessly, almost like she couldn’t believe it. Her eyes were locked on Hopper and Will in front of them. El wanted to laugh outright. Stupid adults being stupid.

“Nope,” she let the “p” pop and picked up a branch to toss into the woods. “*Fruits and veggies. No beer. Home by 6*,” she rattled off in a terrible impression of his voice. She even put her hands on her hips like he did. It was absolutely true, all of it. He had literally told her he wasn’t going to keep seeing women because she was getting all of his attention. Which was probably why he was so confused about El’s fixation on Mrs. Byers.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” she muttered, not really paying attention to El anymore. They trudged up to the house mostly in silence until El caught up with Will, snatched his bag, and ran for the house.

“Get back here you thief!” he shouted, giving chase. Both adults hollered after them to be careful and Will was sick and blah blah blah. The second they were out of sight, El “zoomed” him into the house, so he didn’t have to run anymore. That’s what the boys called it when she levitated them anywhere. She dropped him on the couch and flopped onto the empty space next to him, letting the backpack fall to the floor.

“Beat you,” he teased. El grinned and lightly smacked his stomach, making him groan. Hopper came in hollering and lecturing, with a bemused Mrs. Byers in his wake. El and Will slumped together, watching him pace and rant about being on their best behavior and being responsible and not taking stupid risks. Mrs. Byers disappeared

into the kitchen, presumably to get dinner started. With their ally lost to them, the kids were forced to endure Hopper's irritation, at least until he simmered down. Beside her, Will's stomach grumbled, and she zoomed an apple over to him from the backpack. Will took a lazy bite out of it, not taking his eyes off of Hopper for fear of getting yelled at.

At that, Hopper dropped into the armchair and ran a hand through his hair, obviously frustrated.

"You do realize our year is almost up, right?"

"Right," both kids intoned.

"So why the hell are you running around like it isn't dangerous?"

They exchanged a look, raising their brows, only to look back at Hopper and shrug. He hung his head, shaking it.

"You two are gonna kill me. Seriously, before the cigarettes get me, it's gonna be you two." He raised his head again, and held out his hands pleadingly. "What do I gotta do, huh? What do I have to do to get you to follow the rules for the next few months? Tell me. Please."

In spite of herself, El couldn't prevent the small grin that tugged at her lips. Hopper frowned.

“You have got to be kidding me!”

She jabbed a finger at him, “You asked!”

“Kid--”

“I agree with her,” Will interrupted nonchalantly. Hopper’s mouth opened and shut like a dumb fish.

“You’re in on this too?” he whispered furiously at him. Both kids nodded. El mentally pulled at Will’s shirt to keep him from saying anything about the others. Hopper would not be happy to know that the whole party was talking about them.

“It’s the only thing I want,” El informed him snappishly, crossing her arms over her chest.

“You need,” he said slowly, “to stop.” He stood, making firm eye contact with both of them. “I’m serious, guys, enough is enough. I don’t want to hear another word about this, all right?”

“Yes, sir,” they answered simultaneously.

“Good. Go clean up for dinner.”

3. Chapter 3

Hopper slumped into a chair at Joyce's kitchen table and dragged his hand over his face. He watched her move easily around the kitchen, preparing...something, he honestly wasn't looking at what she was cooking. His damn kid kept hitting his sore spots when it came to Joyce Byers. In his not so humble opinion, she looked as good as she did in high school. Bit worn around the edges, obviously more tired, but still pretty damn good. Lonnie was a fucking idiot for losing her, and Bob was a lucky son of a bitch to have her for the time he did.

And Hopper? Well he was a fucking idiot too, but that was a problem for another day.

"Need help?" he asked, weakly, wincing at how pathetic he sounded. She only laughed.

"The only person worse in this kitchen than me, is you, so no. You just--simmer down over there."

"I was not *that* bad," he protested, leaning back in the chair. He watched her shoulders shake.

"Sure you weren't." She turned her head over her shoulder and snorted, "They left a note, Hop."

He tossed his hands up in the air, "How are you so calm right now? Fucking--last week Will was ten minutes late, and I thought you were going to call the FBI. *Again* ."

She flicked water at him, "That was...not different at all, but still." She jutted a hip out, stirring sauce in a pan on the stove, "I think--maybe one of us flares up and there's not enough fuel for both of us to go nuclear. You know?" She looked at him, expression regretful. He could only shrug. It was probably true. He tended to be a lot calmer, a lot more focused, the crazier Joyce got. Maybe they operated in inverse.

"We are quite the pair," he grumbled. They didn't talk much for a long moment. He lit up a cigarette and tried to remember that he loved his daughter, adopted though she was, and that he was trying to protect her, not strangle her himself. Actually, if he was being honest, he admired her grit. She was pretty used to taking care of herself, and she *had* been following his rules. Mostly. It was just that she'd bend over backwards for those kids. She'd do anything for them, and it scared the ever living shit out of Hopper. He knew *exactly* how far that loyalty went. He knew *exactly* how much she could give, and fuck him stupid if he didn't want to protect her from herself.

"You and El?" she asked offhand, interrupting his thoughts.

"Us too. I meant you n' me. Shit, failed marriages, damaged kids. I'm up, you're down, and it's like a damn roller coaster." She hummed, it was a truth they couldn't ignore after all. "I mean, when we were kids...All we wanted was to get out of Hawkins and not end up like our parents."

"You got out," she pointed out. Yeah, through the army. Two tours in Vietnam and a ticket back to Indianapolis. Police academy was a cakewalk by comparison. Then he met Diane. Then Sarah.

He scoffed, ashing his cigarette on the tray, “And then fucked that right to hell.”

Joyce froze, “Don’t say that.”

“Why? I did,” he shrugged. That’s what happened. He nearly jumped out of his skin when she slammed her wooden spoon down.

“No. You didn’t and you damn well know it.” She turned to glare at him, a little wild eyed. He reared back.

“Joyce...”

“If you *fucked it to hell* , and you blame yourself for what happened to Sarah...” She inhaled unsteadily. “If you’re saying that you had any control in what happened to her, then you’re saying I had control over what happened to Will. That we’re both at fault. Is that what you’re saying? That it’s my fault that Will got taken?”

“No, Joyce! No, what the hell--?”

“Then don’t say stupid shit, Jim!”

They fell silent, staring at each other for a long, torrid moment. Hopper honestly didn’t know what to do with himself. Didn’t realize

he'd dropped his cigarette into the tray. Of course, it didn't matter because that's when the kids came in.

"Why are you fighting?" El asked blithely, pulling out the chair next to him and zooming his cigarette into the trash.

"We're not fighting," they answered in tandem, still watching each other.

"Coulda fooled me," Will chimed in, taking the wooden spoon from his mother to help stir. He nudged her with her hip, breaking the intense eye contact between her and Hopper. She went back to cooking and he turned to El.

"Sorry guys, just...adult talk. So what were you really working on during your jailbreak?" He watched the kids smirk at each other slyly. Will nodded, and then El "zoomed" in his backpack. That's what they were calling her powers *zooming*. Dimwit kids. Will pulled out the pages of the book he was drawing, and passed over some pages to El. They were both talking a mile a minute, voices overlapping as they tried to fill in details. He looked over the pages with some interest because he'd heard them whispering together about it, but he'd never seen it. The title was reminiscent of what everybody in town called Will after he came back. *Zombie Boy*. Good on him for owning it. El eagerly snatched a paper from Will to show him.

"And that's me, Dad! Will's making me a superhero!"

"Dude," he intoned, mildly impressed at how good Will was getting,

“Sweet.” He lifted a brow at the character’s outfit and smiled at his kid, “Bitchin’ jacket.”

“*Hop*,” Joyce grouched. He didn’t really pay attention because El was smiling and blushing a little. She mouthed *bitchin’* back at him, making him laugh. Will giggled, but she kicked out at him, which started a spat.

“Clear the table, guys,” Joyce ordered over the din. They weren’t paying attention though, still squabbling.

“All right! You heard her, clear it off, let’s go.”

He helped them collect the pages and get them in the right order. El was about to zoom the backpack out to the living room, but he stopped her, made her take it herself. She was getting damn lazy about normal person stuff. He was trying to get her to control herself a bit. Couldn’t have her pulling stunts at school, not like that. Fuck him, he didn’t want to have that conversation any time soon. But have it they would, sooner or later. He met Joyce’s eyes over the table as she sat down. Still looked a little frazzled, which confused him.

They’d talked about Sarah some after Will was safe at home. He was still pretty weak, coughing. Tired. Some might say it triggered Hop. Sent him right back to that hospital room that day his baby girl died. So he talked about her for the first time. With Joyce. Told her how fast it had happened, how helpless he’d felt. Mostly he’d assured her that she couldn’t blame herself for Will. He understood where she was coming from. He didn’t understand the strength of her reaction to it.

The kids were a good distraction. Kept Joyce's attention. Jonathan would have been a better ally, though. The short ones had the tendency to throw him under the bus. Without remorse too, come to think of it. At that thought, he looked over at his daughter, eyeing her warily. She did that creepy thing she liked to do, make eye contact with no expression on her face. Tilted her head like some crazy bird.

"Stop that."

Little shit had the nerve to grin up at him while spearing another green bean. Ooohohoho, they were so having a talk when they got home. When he looked back at his food, Joyce was watching them with a smile on her face. He couldn't resist the impulse to smile back, even knowing El was probably watching. Ever since El had brought up her...thoughts about him and Joyce, his feelings for Joyce, he'd been hyper aware of himself around her. He tried not to touch her as much, not to look at her so much, not to...generally be too much around her. All that did was show him just how much he did those things. Couldn't shove that cat back in the bag.

It was beyond ridiculous. Joyce didn't think of him like that. Yeah, they'd gone through some shit, they'd fooled around *decades* ago, but that didn't change the basic facts. Jim Hopper was not...he just wasn't the best choice for anybody. El got stuck with him because of circumstances, so he'd do right by her as best he could. He didn't have to drag Joyce down with him.

They wrapped up dinner pretty quickly, and Will all but jumped to offer to clean up himself. Joyce almost insisted that he go get ready to lie down, but he ignored her in favor of turning on the sink.

Hopper struggled not to laugh, but ushered El toward the door, making their goodbyes. Joyce followed them to the door, presumably to lock it behind them. As usual, El dashed to the car at her own pace. But Hopper was stopped by Joyce's hand on his elbow.

"Hey about earlier..."

He waved her off, "Forget it."

She slumped, letting out a frustrated sigh, "I just--You gotta give yourself a break, Hopper. I mean..."

"I know, Joyce, I'm trying."

Her hand slipped from his arm, "I know. I know you are." There was something in her eyes that made him pause. The sincerity of her words, full of something he couldn't quite put a finger on. Almost like she really did *know* he was trying. Not that she could...He shook it off, trying not to think too hard on it. He was trying to do better for his kid, not to get brownie points with Joyce Byers. He started to turn away, keep walking, but she called out for him again, a strange smile on her face.

"What did El want?" He frowned. "Earlier, she said there was only one thing she wanted and she'd follow your rules. What was it?"

Hopper let out a rueful laugh and kicked at the ground, scuffing his boot. Of course. Of course she heard that. He brushed his nose with

the back of his hand.

“Nothing. Just wants to see the Wheeler kid more.”

She crossed her arms, confused, “You’re not letting her?”

He sighed, “Not until she kicks my ass, Joyce.” He turned, calling over his shoulder, “Not until she kicks my ass.”

4. Chapter 4

“You two are crazy.”

“For once, I have to agree with Dustin.” Lucas held up his hands placatingly, “I know, it’s hard for me too, but I’m not totally on board with this.”

Max flopped onto the couch with a wide shrug, “I’m in.”

“Me too!” Lucas said eagerly, sitting next to her. Max beamed at him and then winked at El.

“Traitor!” Dustin screeched. “What has this party come to? Choosing women over logic?”

Mike and Lucas shared a look and then blinked back at Dustin, “Yes,” they intoned. Will was nodding with a resigned twist of his lips.

“I’ll help,” Nancy said happily. Jonathan looked at her incredulously. “What? I like your mom and Chief Hopper. I think they’d be good together.”

“You’ve got to be kidding.”

“You’re *helping*,” she said firmly. “You too, Dusty, so pop a squat.”

“Damn it,” Dustin groused, sinking into his chair. Ever since the Snow Ball, he was completely incapable of saying no to anything Nancy asked of him. El thought it was kind of sweet.

“Two party members are in need, Dustin,” Mike reminded him with all seriousness. “It’s our sworn duty to assist.”

Dustin let out a put upon wail, “*Fiiiine* ! But listen, when shit goes down, and it will, I cannot be caught in the crossfire. Cause you three,” he pointed at Will, Jonathan, and El, “have immunity, and you,” he pointed at Mike, “have it by some unfortunate luck of the draw. Let’s be honest, I’m the real catch in this group.” They all groaned. “I’m serious! Chief Hopper is the damn chief! Of Police! He could murder us and make it look like an accident!”

“Fine,” Mike said reasonably, “If shit happens, Will takes all the blame.”

“What?!”

“If El gets in trouble, then we’ll never see her. Your mom will think it’s cute and the chief wouldn’t cross your mom for anything.”

“True.”

“So we’re agreed. Everybody’s in. So,” Mike sat and looked at his best friend and his girlfriend, “What do you need us to do?”

They pooled their money to buy ingredients for the recipe Jonathan had agreed to. El swiped a spare key to give him so he could get in the cabin to cook before Hopper got home. Nancy was going to cook and help him set up. Dustin, Max and Lucas were in charge of getting all the stuff they needed: a tablecloth, real silverware, candles and candlesticks, fancy stuff. Max said that she could steal a bottle of wine from her parents.

“They won’t notice anyway,” she grumbled. Lucas put an arm around her, said something quietly to make her smile. Dustin kicked her foot for the same reason. She kicked him back, smiling anyway.

Will was in charge of picking out music and getting his mom to the cabin. Mike and El were in charge of making sure that Hopper got home early from work. Mike was supposed to go the station and nag Hopper to see El, saying that he’d promised, and Mike wasn’t allowed there when he wasn’t there. El would radio Hopper claiming the same thing, that he’d promised to be home early that day. It was taking advantage. But only a little. And after all, it was for the greater good.

Jonathan and Nancy went straight to the cabin after school, while Steve agreed to drive the others around and get them to the cabin. Will was supposed to get Mrs. Byers there first and Mike was supposed to bring Hopper later so he couldn’t shut the whole thing down.

And everything went right to plan. By the time Mrs. Byers got there, Jonathan was pulling the roast out of the oven while Nancy and

Dustin set the table. Dustin claimed they needed to create an “ambiance,” and Nancy was the only person willing to take his directions. Steve had hung around and was teaching Lucas and Max how to dance to old records like his mom had taught him. El paced as Will explained to his mother why she was really there.

“We just wanted to do something nice for you guys...” They were arguing a bit, and Mrs Byers was not pleased that Jonathan had been helping them scheme, but she came around pretty quickly.

“It’s actually very sweet,” she conceded. “And surprisingly nice.” At that, El looked around at the work her friends had done. The table was set with a cloth and lit candles. They’d hung up some Christmas lights and turned off the lamps. The music was pretty good too. El thought there was nothing prettier than Lucas laughing as Max spun around, hair flaring out and catching the light. Jonathan’s food smelled good too. She really did have the best friends.

The knock on the door came and everybody froze, looking at El. Waiting. She smiled and unlocked the door, opening it to reveal Hopper bickering with Mike. They were both looking insistent and annoyed, but immediately quieted when the simultaneously turned to look through the open door, a little startled to see everyone inside. Mike recovered first, bounding through to hug El and take her hand.

Hopper stepped through the door, put his hat on the hook, and then his hands on his hips. El immediately tensed, knowing that stance. But Joyce stepped forward, preventing anyone from saying anything.

“The kids made us dinner!” she said, voice a little shrill and words too fast for normal. “Just a thank you dinner, nothing else going on.” Hopper scrunched his face up, obviously bewildered by her keen

insistence. He tilted his head at her as he took his coat off and hung it up on the hook next to his hat.

“O-kay?” he said slowly. “What for?”

“Just because!” Nancy chimed in brightly. She was filling their glasses with water as Jonathan brought the wine over to the table. Hopper frowned at that, but didn’t say anything. “We made dinner, and we’re going to take the kids out to a movie and then the arcade.” She put her hands up placatingly. “El will be in a wig and dressed in boy clothes, so don’t worry.” She grabbed the bag with El’s prepared disguise and handed it over to him to inspect. He did so, warily, looking over at Joyce occasionally. El noticed she kept a smile on her face.

“All right--” He scowled as the kids celebrated under their breaths, hissed yeses , low high fives and fist bumps. Lucas and Max danced their shoulders up and down. “That’s enough, simmer down. No monkey business out there. El doesn’t get left alone for a second! No using your powers, and I mean it! I want you back here before 10! There is no reason--!” He was cut off by their resounding goodbyes and see you later, talking as they all bounded out of the cabin, whooping and laughing as they piled into Steve’s and Jonathan’s cars.

Joyce was really trying hard not to laugh as Hopper completely deflated when the door slammed shut behind him. She wasn’t stupid. Obviously the kids were up to something, and obviously Hopper had some idea what it was, but dinner was dinner. And a dinner alone with an adult was such a rarity that Joyce wasn’t going to be the one to question it. Besides, Jonathan really was a good cook. She went and took him by the hand, pulling him toward the table.

“Come on, let’s eat before it gets cold,” she said simply. He was still looking skeptical, but complied anyway. She kept up a steady stream of chatter, distracting him as much as possible while she served their food. Eventually, he started responding and relaxed enough to smile at her and eat properly. When he was settled enough, half a glass of wine down, she brought the kids up.

“So what do you think the kids are up to?” she asked, mischievously, leaning forward as if it was another conspiracy to unravel. His eyes lit up at her, because that was what their shared experience entailed. But still, he remained distant.

“Probably what they’re always up to: angling for something bigger.”

“Buttering us up?” she asked, cocking a brow. That was something to think about. Hopper just shrugged.

For Hopper’s part, he was conflicted. Happy to spend time with Joyce alone, but irritated that El never seemed to listen to anything he said. That those damn kids enabled her so much. This was so out of line that he couldn’t see straight. Still, he was having a hard time staying mad when Joyce was obviously so pleased about the set up. *Just* because the kids were being nice. That was it. That was the only reason.

“Sure. No doubt the short ones got their minds set on something and dragged the older ones into it. Doesn’t take much to convince those kids to keep close to each other anymore.”

“True,” she agreed, “It’s sweet anyway. They could have done anything, but they, uh--” She cut herself off, shaking her head.

“What?” he asked her, a little incredulously, not sure where she was going with that statement. It unsettled him, and a stupid little bit of warmth fluttered in his stomach. Hope, maybe? No. No. She waved him off, cheeks pinking adorably.

“Nothing, it’s nothing. I’m being silly, it’s just sweet.”

They made a resolution not to talk about the kids or about Hawkins Lab or the DOE. And Hopper realized that it wasn’t all that difficult. Being a cop and working retail weren’t all that different when it came down to the nuts and bolts of it. They both had plenty of horror stories. Hopper even found himself talking about Indianapolis, and a little about the men he’d served with. He never talked about Vietnam. Never talked about what happened, what he did, what he’d seen others do. But one of her stories about Lonnie rang so reminiscent for him that he couldn’t stop himself. He told her about a guy named Freddie. He and Freddie were in the same company, 1st Infantry, 5th Field Artillery. *Faithful and true*. Those were their words, embroidered on their patches and shouted at attention. They had a good track record, commendations, awards. But all Hopper remembered was goddamn Freddie. So he told Joyce a little about him, how he dealt with him, but not necessarily the whole of the story.

“Can I ask what happened to him?”

Hopper reared back, taking the cigarette she offered him, “You can ask.”

“Bad?”

“Worse than you’re thinking.”

He could physically feel the moment she got a whiff of the implications, “*Hop*,” she said pathetically, face crumpling.

“Don’t do that.”

“What? Feel sorry? Wish that things were different?”

“The second one. That’s pity--”

“I don’t *pity* you, Jim,” she snapped. “Do you *pity* me for all the shit with Lonnie? For having to raise two boys on practically nothing all by myself?”

“No,” he grumbled. Because he didn’t. Joyce was one of the most capable people he’d ever met. And those boys were a marvel all things considered. Hell, they would be a marvel even if considerations were better.

“Because you don’t. And I don’t. And we don’t need to do this thing where we feel sorry for ourselves and get defensive because there’s so much shit between the two of us that we’d be here for weeks going

through it.”

“You’re not wrong,” he agreed, handing her back the cigarette. She took a long drag, watching him intently.

“You know,” she blew out the smoke, “I never really believed it would work.”

“What’s that?” There was a laundry list of things she could have been referring to, given the past couple of years.

“Bob. Being with him.”

“He was a good guy,” Hopper said, cutting her off, “And he made you happy, you don’t need to dwell on it more than that.”

She scoffed, passing back the cigarette, “But I do. Did. A lot, right after, when I had to tell his family it was a bear.” Joyce settled back into her chair, brought her knees up to her chest, feeling comfortable enough with him to tell the truth. “I wanted it to work so badly, and he wanted so badly to be there for me, but it was like...There was this wall between us, and it was like...I couldn’t get the words out. And even when I could...I...”

“The words didn’t make sense,” he finished for her. Her eyes snapped up to his eyes which were already watching her. “Tried to tone it down not to freak him out, did ya?” he tilted his head to take a drag of the cigarette, and she nodded. She clenched and unclenched her

jaw, trying very hard to keep herself calm. How frustrating it had been listening to Bob try to tell her everything was all right, that everything was okay and normal. Almost as maddening as everyone insisting Will had been dead. *It simply wasn't true* .

She liked how Hop responded to her better. Liked that he nodded quietly, listening first, and then telling her his own fucked up version. He didn't feed into her fears, didn't try to make her feel better. He just did things to help her help herself. Came around, helped look after the boys, didn't make her feel stupid for her anxiety. Not that Bob ever had. He'd been such a love, so sweet. She dropped her head to her shoulder. Hopper was just different. She didn't like him better than Bob, just differently. And she honestly didn't feel guilty about her closeness with Hopper because it didn't change how close she'd been with Bob. It sounded confusing when she put it into words, but it didn't feel confusing.

"People deal with things differently," he continued. "Doesn't matter if you've seen the same shit. Do the same things. If you don't let 'em...do what they need to do..." He drained the last of his wine and passed a hand over his head.

"You mean Diane?" she asked quietly. It was his turn to nod silently. Joyce had heard some bits and pieces of how they split up. Hop had been so adamant about holding onto Sarah, about keeping everything exactly the way it was, and Diane had wanted to move forward. Move on from it. Their inability to compromise on that point, combined with Hop's alternative coping methods, drove them apart.

"I suppose...you just reach that point where it's make or break, and both of you have to decide you're not gonna break."

“That how it was with Lonnie?”

She snorted, “No. We were broken the whole time and I stopped putting the pieces back.”

“Maybe that’s how Diane felt, too.” He shrugged, “I wouldn’t know. She never told me.”

Joyce darted a hand out, “You’re *not* like Lonnie, Hop. Not even a little bit. So don’t start that shit.”

He smirked at her, a little droll and a little sad.

“Yeah, well, all I can do is move on, right? Think about El. Doing right by her. Being my best self, or whatever crap advice people like to give.”

They finished their meal, cleaned up while listening to various records, and Hopper drove her home. The kids were already there, waiting. Hop didn’t even come in, just waited in the doorway for El to gather up her things. Then he was snapping his goodbye to the boys, nodding at her, and gone.

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Hopper was irritatingly quiet on the drive back to the cabin, but El wasn’t at all deterred by this fact.

“So?” she asked eagerly.

“Sew some buttons.”

“Huh?”

He barked a laugh, “Nothing. I’m not happy about you pulling a stunt like that, but it was... *nice* . So I’m not grounding you for the rest of your life.”

“I don’t care about that.”

“ *Nothing* . Happened. Now will you stop meddling?”

She crossed her arms, sullen and annoyed at all the stupidity.
“Never.”

He let out an exasperated sigh, almost a groan, and dropped his head to the steering wheel for a quick moment. They drove in silence the rest of the way to the cabin, tense. When they parked, Hopper reached out to stop her, a gentle hand on her arm. She followed it up to his eyes, which were soft and happy instead of angry like she’d thought they’d be. El couldn’t help but smile at him. He smiled back.

“Thanks, kid.”

“You’re welcome, Dad.”